

THE DIRECTOR OF
CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE


National Intelligence Council

14 November 1985



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Enclosure:
"Welcome Back, Thunderer"
Wall Street Journal
14 November 1985

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Welcome Back, Thunderer

By SETH LIPSKY

One of the quirks of the Times of London is that its obituary column publishes comments sent by readers. Tucked at the bottom of a column last week was a note from President Reagan about the Times's editor, Charles Douglas-Home, who died of cancer at age 48. Mr. Reagan paid particular attention to Mr. Douglas-Home's own writing, which, the president said, "cut through the layers of confusion, blather and muddle that often obscure the realities of political and international affairs." His loss, the president wrote, would be felt by "all the friends of freedom."

Mr. Reagan was one of many who paid tribute to the Times editor. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and other British politicians, European intellectuals and competing newspapermen seemed to awaken at Mr. Douglas-Home's passing to the fact that something remarkable has occurred at the once-dying Times since it was acquired by Rupert Murdoch. Those who worried that Mr. Murdoch would turn the paper into another sensationalist tabloid are discovering that the Times has rebounded in circulation and financial health and has regained its resounding voice. The Thunderer is again being heard.

More refreshing still is the substance of what the Times has been saying. Freeing



THE TIMES
1785-1985

itself from the swamp of equivocation that is known as the political center in Europe, the paper has moved sharply to the right. It's always a bit of a mystery who personally is responsible for such a move—owner, editor or staff. But the Douglas-Home editorship commenced shortly before the Falklands War. Once the war had begun, a now-famous editorial called "We Are All Falklanders Now" left no doubt the Times was preparing for battle—and not just in the South Atlantic.

Themes laid down in the Falklands campaign have been growing stronger. On Grenada, for example, the Times weighed in with a leading article called "The Fourth Frontier," as doctrinaire as anything President Monroe ever wrote. "The ghastly measurements of social decay in Central America tempt European opinion to draw false analogies with Afghanistan or Soviet behavior in its own sphere of influence in East Europe," the Times said. "There is no real analogy. . . . In Europe we must be concerned to help the United States restore the severity of this southern flank before it becomes one more dangerous frontier for us all."

In an editorial called "Power and Superpower," the Times warned Mr. Reagan against allowing "his dealings with Moscow to develop into a weblike system such as Dr. Kissinger tried to weave, to the point where the system became an end in itself so that the United States was deprived of the freedom to apply strict conditionality to each and every individual act of mischief perpetrated by Soviet hostility." That freedom "must be preserved if the United States and its allies are to be able to cope with a system which operates on an inherently outmoded, malevolent, discredited, and dishonorable ideology: an evil empire indeed."

Of course, it isn't Mr. Reagan who needs such warnings. It's Britain and Europe, whose politicians are constantly under pressure from a virulent peace campaign. When Britain's own Tories waver, the Times gets particularly eloquent. In March, Mrs. Thatcher's foreign secretary, Sir Geoffrey Howe, made the mistake of comparing America's space defense plans to the Maginot Line. Sir Geoffrey's speech, the Times thundered back, was "mealy-mouthed, muddled in conception, negative, Luddite, ill-informed and, in effect if not intention, a 'wrecking amendment' to the whole plan. In the circumstances it might more appropriately be described as 'the Gorbachev amendment.'"

The Times's disgust for backsliders on defense is almost matched by its annoyance at doubters of Mrs. Thatcher's strategy for economic recovery. It hasn't yet regained enthusiasm for the gold standard previous editors cherished. Nor has it backed a real supply-side program for Britain. But it has been clear on fundamentals; the Labor Party, it noted, "still fails to learn the lesson which has long been understood by Socialists in West Germany, and has been apprehended fast by France's socialist masters. The role of government is to oil the workings of the free enterprise economy; it does not make sense to wrench the engine out of the car first."

Charles Wilson has been named the Times's 13th editor in 200 years. Even as his predecessor lay dying, the Times was thundering away on everything from corruption at UNESCO ("Farce and Failure") to hypocrisy on South Africa ("No to Sanctions"). Lest temporal leaders get too fired up, the Times offered nearly three columns of type on the 20th anniversary of Vatican II. It complained about "the despoliation of the liturgy" and "an unmistakable playing down" of the supernatural. "That justice in the world is a cause no Christian may avoid is a truth the Second Vatican Council declared most vigorously, not expecting perhaps that some of the faithful would grasp at it as an alternative to religion itself," the Times said. Then it asserted its belief that the church's "new instability is in fact a condition for growth and freshness, of less certainty but greater humility, of still richer possibilities for the future. . . ." The editors might as well have been writing about the Times itself.

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